Pen Pictures of Early Pioneer Life in Upper Canada

By
A "Canuck"

An Old Homestead on the Niagara—Built 1810

PEN PICTURES OF

EARLY PIONEER LIFE IN UPPER CANADA

BY

A "CANUCK"

(OF THE FIFTH GENERATION)

PROFUSELY ILLUSTRATED

TORONTO.
WILLIAM BRIGGS
1904

TO THE

Boys and Girls of Canada,

AND ESPECIALLY

TO THOSE BOYS AND GIRLS, OLD AND YOUNG,

WHO ARE

DESCENDANTS OF THE EARLY PIONEERS,

THIS BOOK IS

RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED.

INTRODUCTION

THE main object of the author in putting together the scattered pages forming this humble volume has been to give glimpses of life—of real homely life—among the early pioneers. He lays no claim to any other merit than that of telling his simple story. His means of information have been of a more than ordinary character, and these he has endeavored to improve by personal enquiry and visiting the localities, so far as possible, where the scenes are laid and depicted. There is, as will be seen, a large amount of information supplied, which he would fain hope may be found useful in adding to the historic fund of other writers, who have already placed themselves on record on the same subject as historians of early pioneer life in Canada. Real and homely as his tale has been told, there will still be found no lack of romantic incidents and chapters of much interest to the general reader. The book, in a word, is the author's humble contribution to the history of the early days of his native province. Access to old manuscripts and records of family events retained in both his father's and mother's families for a century and more, has helped him to a very great extent in carrying out the design which he had in view when he first commenced wh[illegible] him, was a labor of love.

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NOTE.—All the illustrations in this book are from photographs taken expressly for it, most of them by Mr. E. F. Walker of Toronto.

Pen Pictures of Early Pioneer Life in Upper Canada.

I.

WHO THE EARLY SETTLERS WERE

Early settlement—U. E. Loyalists—First settlement at Adolphustown—Other settlements—Squatters—Movement of refugees towards Fort Niagara and other British forts—Grant of land to Butler's Rangers—Nationality of settlers—Where they came from—Yankee immigration into Canada—The "Pennsylvania Dutch" settlers—The Quaker settlers—Other settlers—Grants of land to soldiers of Revolutionary War and War of 1812.

A LARGE proportion of the people who settled on the frontier of Canada during the earlier days of settlement were United Empire Loyalists, those who came from the neighboring States of the American Union at the close of the Revolutionary War of 1776. The first settlement of any note was that made at Adolphustown, in Prince Edward County, [illegible] May, 1784. After that date, settlements grew up on the St. Lawrence, Niagara and Detroit Rivers, and at Long Point, on Lake

Erie. The impression is general that there were but a few squatters previous to that time. Provincial Government affairs, however, being at that period in an unorganized condition, such records as are at hand have only the reliability of tradition. A number of the first settlers were persons who had naturally sought refuge in the vicinity of Fort Niagara and other border forts, then in the possession of England, from the relentless persecution that was waged against British sympathizers intending to return home when peace was concluded, as they fully expected it would be, in favor of Britain; but, finding the result to be contrary to their expectations, they crossed the border and took up land on the Canadian side. Colonel Butler and his Rangers were granted a large tract of land in the vicinity of what is now the town of Niagara.

The first settlers were a mixed stock of English, Irish, Scotch and German, many of whose ancestors had settled in the United States, then British territory, a century or more previous, some of them probably coming to America on the *Mayflower*, in 1620. This class of settlers, who came mostly from New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, brought with them the customs, habits and style of living of their American forefathers. Being of a Conservative type, they preferred a monarchical to a republican form of government. After these settlers came a large number of Yankees, attracted by the fertile lands of Canada: and, although they were not British in

sentiment, many of them afterwards became loyal subjects of the country, and fought for Britain in the War of 1812. There were whole settlements of "Pennsylvania Dutch" (properly called German), adherents of the Mennonite and Tunker faiths, whose descendants to this day make up a large part of the population of Welland, Lincoln, Waterloo and York Counties. There were also large settlements of Quakers, particularly in the vicinity of Font Hill, near St. Catharines, and along the Bay of Quinte, who, like the Mennonites, left the States, fearing the Government might insist on their bearing arms. The feeling against British sympathizers being so strong, there was some talk of compelling all, irrespective of their religious belief, to take part in military affairs. Many of the Mennonites and Quakers, having been granted the religious freedom they desired under British rule, were not in sympathy with the Revolutionary party. This brought down the wrath of the new Government upon them, and, although they threatened to enact measures that would curtail the freedom of these sects, they never carried their threats into execution. There were also a few settlers from the British Isles and from Germany, but the larger number of this class came later on. Many of the British soldiers who had taken part in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, having been given free grants of land by the Government, after receiving their discharge, settled in the country.

XXV.

SAVING HABITS OF GRANDFATHER.

Economy practised—Everything of hand manufacture—Nothing wasted—Old furniture, newspapers, etc., stored away.

THEN as now extravagance was a sin, economy a virtue, but economy seems to have been practised more generally by the people in the early times than it is now. In the early days everything was made by hand, nowadays nearly everything is produced by machinery, which has reduced the price accordingly. Imported goods were so high-priced as to be beyond the reach of the limited means of the struggling settler in the backwoods, in those days of scarcity of money and low prices for farm produce. High ocean freights, added to the cost of conveyance to long distances inland, more than doubled the first cost price of the imported article. Besides, the settlers in the rural districts felt more comfortable in their substantial and inexpensive home-made clothing. And they also knew too well the value of their independence to run into debt for what they could well afford to do without. In this respect it is not too

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XXI

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THEN [illegible] game [illegible] [illegible] than it is now. In the [illegible] by hand [illegible] replaced by machinery [illegible] the stru gling [illegible] in those days [illegible] [illegible]

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Spinning Flax—The Reel Spinning Wool.

much to say that they were no less happier nor less wise than some of their descendants of the present day, who cut a dash in expensive imported garments obtained on credit. Our forefathers wasted nothing. Every scrap of iron was thrown in a barrel or heap in a corner of the shed, every old piece of furniture was stowed away in the garret or workshop connected with most houses, even the old letters, newspapers and magazines were bundled up and packed in boxes and chests. It is to this characteristic saving of our thrifty ancestors of fifty and one hundred years ago that the relic-hunter is able to unearth mines of wealth of this character in some of the old farmhouses.*

* It is only in farmhouses that have remained in the family for three and four generations that any great collection of furniture, etc., of bygone days is to be found.

LI.

THE SUPERSTITIONS OF THE PEOPLE.

Superstitious beliefs common fifty and one hundred years ago—Reason for decline of superstition - Encouragement of superstition - Some of the old superstitions—Thunder and lightning.

THE people of fifty and one hundred years ago were more superstitious than they are now, the great advances in education having rid the minds of the people of many of the superstitious beliefs held by the majority of the people years ago. Science has helped to explain away and make ridiculous many of the ideas of the supernatural indulged in by our forefathers, and yet we cannot blame our ancestors for their erroneous theories and practices, they were trained to them. These things were fostered by people of all classes. The people of New England believed in witches, ghosts, etc., and we find the German settlers bringing similar notions from the fatherland. The old settlers always butchered their hogs, made their soap, sowed their grain, plucked their geese in a certain time of the moon. We do not deny that the moon has a great influence over the earth, but

the old settlers certainly carried this idea of the moon's influence too far, imagination in most cases having more influence than the moon. The old almanac always hung by a nail to the wall, and was often consulted by the old folks. When grandmother wished to wean the baby she was very particular in what sign of the zodiac she did it. Such phenomena of nature as thunder, lightning, etc., which are now known to be the result of natural causes, were at one time by many ascribed to the wrath of an angry God. Scientific men, however, by giving an explanation of these disturbances have helped to divest society of much of its former superstition.

LXVII

THE THRESHING.

The use of the flail.—Tramping out the grain.—A familiar picture.—Introduction of the threshing machine.—A slow process.—The horse-power.—The tread-mill.

THE "Threshings" are in many respects much the same now as they have been for years back, yet in the last one hundred years they have undergone a complete transformation. The early settlers threshed most of their grain with the flail. Sometimes with certain kinds of grain, such as oats and peas, they would cover the barn floor with the sheaves or stalks and drive the horses and cattle over it until the grain was all tramped out. We can imagine now we hear the thud, thud, thud of the flail on the threshing floor as the farmer bent to his work. Now and again he stopped to wipe the coursing perspiration from his brow, or to examine the heads of the wheat stalks, to see whether or not they were threshed clean. The first threshing-machine did not come out until about seventy-five years ago, and it was a small affair, with a narrow cylinder, fitted with

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Military Relics, Niagara Historical Society.

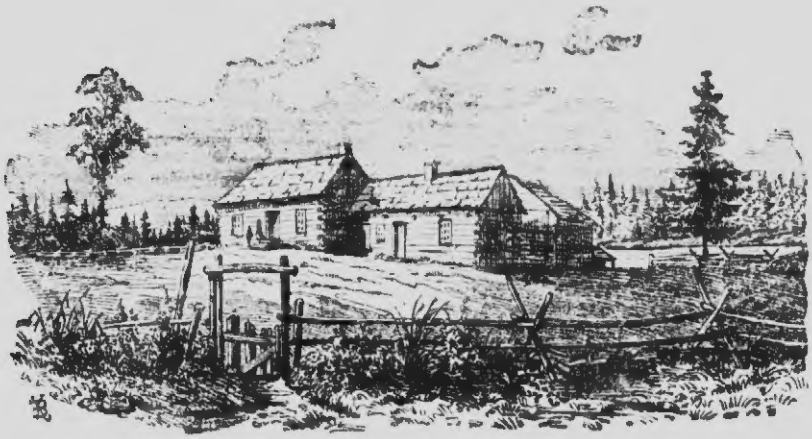
iron spikes, the rapid revolution of which, as the grain passed through between these spikes and the spikes in a half cylinder or concave, shook out the grains of wheat. There being no separators (screens or sieves for separating the grain from the chaff, or carriers for conveying away the straw, everything went out in a heap at the rear of the machine. The straw was raked, shaken and pitched away, leaving the grain and chaff on the floor. It gave considerable work to the men and boys with the fanning-mill to separate the grain from the chaff, for it had to be put through the mill at least twice Nowadays it usually comes out of the threshing-machine cleaned and ready for market.

It required at least eight men to operate one of the old threshing-machines—one man to drive the horses, one man to cut the bands of the sheaves, one to feed, one to take away the straw and to pass it on to three or four more men, who pitched it into the mow or on to the straw-stack in the yard. With all this work the first machines could not thresh more than fifty or seventy-five bushels a day, while now they can thresh as many bushels in an hour. What a mighty difference to the farmer, in time and labor saving.

The "horse-power" stood in the yard at some distance, and was connected with the threshing-machine by a belt and a tumbling rod or shaft, which kept the machine in motion. The driver stood (sometimes sat) on a table or

platform in the centre of the horse-power and flourished his long-lashed whip in the air as he touched up the lagging horses of the four or five teams hitched to the power. Scarcely anything could be heard above the buzz of the machinery but the crack of the driver's whip and his strident voice as in stentorian tones he called out to the horses, "G'ap there," "Go on," "Get up there, Bill," "G'long," "Whoa."

One kind of the primitive threshing-machines was operated by tread-mills, the horses having to walk on rollers. At the present day the horse-power has been almost entirely done away with, the steam thresher (happily for the farmer) having taken its place.



LXXI.

THE PARING BEE.

Co-operative spirit of the pioneers—Frequent social gatherings—Paring bee one of the chief gatherings—Wound up with games or a dance—The coquetting at the paring bees—Dropping a peeling over the shoulder.

LIFE, to a large extent, was co-operative in the early days: the people helped one another. It would, indeed, have been very dull in the backwoods and remote country places if it had not been for their frequent social gatherings. Work and play were combined. One of the chief gatherings of this kind was the paring bee. In the fall of the year, in order to get his apples pared and cored for drying and making apple-sauce, and to prevent them from spoiling, the farmer would invite his neighbors, young and old, to his house to assist him. After a sufficient quantity of apples had been prepared, the guests were regaled with a plentiful luncheon of cake, pie, cider, etc., and then, if there was time, the young folks would spend an hour or so in games of various sorts, and perhaps a dance.

It was the regular thing to see a big burly young fellow dutifully assisting Peggy, or Sarah Jane, or Sally Ann, or Polly, in paring a lapful of apples—sitting as close to her as possible, or we can, in our mind's eye, see some handsome girl throwing a length of apple parings over some bashful Tom or Dick, and laugh to see him blush in confusion at the compliment. Considerable amusement was got by carefully paring an apple so that the peeling would come off in one long piece, then, holding one end of it in the hand and twirling it around the head, when it was let fall on the floor. The letter of the alphabet which it resembled, as it lay on the floor, was supposed to be the initial of the name of the future husband or wife of the party paring it At first the paring was all done by hand, but, later on, machines were introduced, which considerably shortened the process of paring and coring.